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ABSTRACT

The new emphasis on oral communication effectiveness and interpersonal competence in the business world challenges educators to design courses that meet the needs of people who need this kind of training but cannot register for routine college courses due to time constraints. The University of North Carolina (Greensboro) department of communication designed an experimental course to reach this kind of student when a realtor requested a course that would use only the principles applicable to increasing communication effectiveness in real estate agents in an increasingly tight housing market. The course dealt with three factors influencing interpersonal transactions: (1) causes of communication breakdowns, (2) self-concept, and (3) nonverbal factors. Role-playing resulted in new insights in the areas of orientation, persuasion, and the use of visual aids. Specialized courses allowed the instructor the advantages of smaller, more motivated classes and the opportunity for more precise application of communication theory. They also offered the institution additional income and the chance to expand into the community. Although the policies and procedures of some institutions may force instructors to establish an outside consulting firm, it is to the institution's advantage to retain such training workshops as official programs. (HTH)

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COMMUNICATION TRAINING/CONSULTING: A CASE STUDY IN TRAINING REAL ESTATE AGENTS

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COMMUNICATION TRAINING/CONSULTING: A CASE STUDY IN TRAINING REAL ESTATE AGENTS

A growing emphasis on skillful oral communication as tantamount to interpersonal and professional success has surfaced in the past two decades. Authors such as Haim Ginott have taught adults how to talk to kids in Between Parent and Child.[1] Bach and Wyden stressed open negotiation through effective talking and listening between husbands and wives in The Intimate Enemy.[2] Textbooks devoted solely to business communication were almost non-existent twenty years ago--today a score of good books, such as Timm's Managerial Communication: A Finger on the Pulse[3] adapt principles of speech communication to the business arena.

One of the concerns that has emerged from this new emphasis is the need to offer skills training in settings other than the college classroom. Groups ranging from homemakers in a mid-morning meeting at a local club or YWCA to corporate executives and managers sent for expensive weekend seminars are seeking help in learning underlying principles and mastering the practice of a more effective style of talking and listening. These seekers constitute a major segment of today's "nontraditional" student body and offer a challenge to both professors of speech communication and appropriate institutional units, such as continuing education or special adult education, to design courses, workshops, and seminars that will meet the demand with qualified teaching personnel.

Although persons trained in Speech Communication are not the only ones who can teach communication skills, trainers certainly should be knowledgeable and have expertise based on academic soundness and reliable communication theory, not some pop or pseudo science, or loosely related area of human behavior. Indeed, already a number of persons without the appropriate background and training are teaching speech communication courses under labels such as "Leadership Training" taught by a psychologist, "Management Skills" taught by a sociologist, and "Assertiveness Training" taught by a high school graduate who happens to be pushy and uses that pushiness as the sole basis for her course. These three are just a few of several specific examples that we know of in North Carolina--in all cases, the content of the courses is straight from speech communication.

In the past, creative educators have concerned themselves with fitting the nontraditional student into the established mold, especially when speech and language was in part an element that defined the student's "difference." Today's thrust must be the reverse--the mold must be reshaped to fit the needs of the newly emerged adult student groups who want communication skills training but do not want to register for routine college courses. This paper examines one such experimental project, then suggests advantages of extending our efforts into the community that can be gained by both speech communication professors and the total university.

Background of the Project

A local realtor, owner of one of the largest real estate and construction firms in our city, contacted us in October of 1979 through referral from his personal friend and neighbor who happened to be in our academic advising office and knew of our work. Mr. Smith, as we will call the realtor to preserve his anonymity, was concerned for the major drop in the housing industry that had begun and would, as he rightly predicted, grow much worse in the months ahead. His concern, he explained to us, was not so much that any of his twelve agents had trouble selling a house--houses by-and-large sell themselves, with agents serving mainly as locators and paperwork-facilitators. The key to surviving a tight housing market lay in having sufficient listings to show to potential customers, and this was the area where his employees were having problems-- getting sellers to list with one agency rather than another, or to list at all in the case of what we learned to know as the "fizzboes"--"for sale by owners"--the chief target in the listing-seeking competition.

Mr. Smith had hired an advertising design agency to prepare a "presentational kit" for agents to take with them when they called on a potential home-seller. He had been conducting sessions with his staff, having them practice using the kit to "make their pitch." But it wasn't working. The presentations were awkward, the agents were uncomfortable, and the customers weren't responding. What a challenge for

persons used to teaching theories of persuasion and interpersonal communication!

But Mr. Smith had no interest in enrolling his people in our courses in Persuasion or Interpersonal Communication--he wanted us to come to him, to extract only those principles immediately applicable to his situation from the broad theory base that we are accustomed to using. Moreover, his agents needed far more "how to" than "why," prescription than description, or performance rather than theory.

We designed and conducted a series of sessions for the Smith Agency on the following format:

1. A three hour meeting of all twelve agents to hear an orientation lecture that provided the theoretical framework for the subsequent sessions.
2. Four additional sessions of two hours each, once weekly, attended by only four agents (three subgroups totalling twelve sessions for us, repeating the content in each small group.) These were role-playing practice sessions, with further theory added in an informal fashion as the need arose.

In the initial lecture, three of the primary factors influencing the interpersonal transaction were presented.

1. Major causes of communication breakdowns, especially those times when real estate agents might be causing problems with clients rather than alleviating them. Special attention was devoted to perceptual distortion and how it may warp the

the communication outcome.

2. Self-concept and self-image, especially the realization of the impact of a salesperson's image of him/herself on the ability to sell. Much time was devoted in the subsequent small groups to this issue, for we found that the majority of the participants did not believe that real estate agents were important, worthwhile, or even necessary.

3. Nonverbal factors influencing communication outcomes, especially clothing styles, colors, and the appearance of the agent, aspects that were studied from a general rather than a specific orientation. Elements of nonverbal social style and their relationship to communication were framed to encourage the individual in the development of nonverbal style rather than a uniform "dress for success" approach.

In the four sessions of the small groups, the primary goal was to offer the opportunity to practice the listing-seeking interviews in a number of role-playing scenes. Techniques of role playing were taught in the first small group session. Agents alternately played themselves and the members of the family selling the house. The values of role-reversal, well-accepted in interpersonal and group communication, were new to these realtors, and they quickly discovered the advantages in actually playing the scene, rather than just giving the pitch as they had done before. All expressed new insights gained through assuming the part of the house-seller.

The three primary aspects of the theory of interpersonal

influence that we isolated during the small group role-playing sessions were:

1. The "me" orientation as a communication barrier. Agents said, "The kit helps me--it allows me to organize." We had to emphasize that they stop thinking from their viewpoint and think how the presentation affected the listener. Concepts of audience adaptation as one of the keys to successful persuasion, as old as Aristotle and so commonplace to speech teachers, were new ideas to these people. This led naturally to the second principle.

2. The heart of persuasion is good reasons. Does this sound trite? Has Karl Wallace been quoted so often that we believe that everyone knows about good reasons? Well, everyone does not, for by the time we finished a discussion of the reasons why a seller should list a home with an agent, we had ten clear-cut reasons, several as important if not more important than the single concept of increased exposure that the agents and the presentation kits had previously isolated. And as an adjunct to this exploration, the agents began to increase their self-images, for as the number of good reasons grew, they saw the role of the agent as far more significant than they had formerly envisioned it.[4]

3. The third area centered on skills in reading aloud and presentational techniques that are discussed under "delivery" in public speaking textbooks. However, we had a double problem in this area, for we discovered at the outset

that the presentation kits were poor visual aids--far too detailed and repetitive. Also, they developed only one basic reason why a client should list with a realtor--added exposure--overlooking a number of good selling points. Then, the agents were violating a basic public speaking premise: a visual aid is simply another device, another piece of supporting material that enables the speaker to clarify or reinforce a point. It is not a chart, poster, or model that the speaker is going to talk about. The Smith agents were totally glued to their kits, letting these packets direct them, rather than using the materials to help make the sale. And finally, the agents were reading almost every word on every page of the kit--a process that took 25 minutes and intentionally left no room for dialogue with the client. We were sorely tempted to recommend total elimination of the kits, yet we knew that Mr. Smith had invested heavily in them, believed in them, and that several advantages could be gained through more skillful and personalized use of the kits.

So in the small group sessions we had not only to teach some basic principles of good persuasion and how to put it across, but we had to "unteach" some counter-productive delivery techniques.

At the end of the series, Mr. Smith and the real estate agents all felt that the lecture and role playing sessions had been of real value. Mr. Smith said that he saw changes in both the attitudes and behaviors of his sales force, and

he was highly satisfied with the investment he had made. The enthusiasm of the agents was demonstrated in their request for a fourth small group session when the original design had called for only three nights for practice.

Implications

The real estate listing interview training program was only one of many possible applications of speech communication theory to satisfy the needs of a group of nontraditional students. While we teach many of the same principles in courses in interpersonal communication or persuasion, this particular student group would never have taken those courses because they lacked the time, motivation, insight to see the relevance of the content to their business needs, or were just not interested in "going back to college." Had we not been able to adjust the ideas through the use of pertinent examples, the agents would probably never have made the connection between theory and its applicability.

In building a case for the importance of offering specialized courses, seminars, or workshops for nontraditional students, two advantages for the speech communication teacher and two for the university seem evident.

For The Teacher

1. The professor experiences a stimulating and challenging teaching climate that is different from the daily classroom routine. Often the special course may have a very small enrollment, since FTE[5] ratios are not so important as in

regular college classes. If the professor is accustomed to 250 students in lecture courses and 25 in performance courses, it is a treat to lecture to 12 or to coach 4 in practice sessions! Most extended campus workshops have a shorter total time span than the 4 month semester. While some instructors may feel rushed, we find that fewer class sessions are not necessarily a disadvantage when the class size is kept small. Attendance is more regular and there is less absenteeism. Students have a higher initial level of interest in the material, so less time needs to be devoted to convincing the class that the course content will be "relevant" to their "real world" experiences.

2. The professor is able to make more precise application of communication theory than in the college classroom. for the examples and illustrations can be kept in a single frame of reference--as in this case, the soliciting of real estate listings. It is a challenge to adapt theory to specific settings and to become more prescriptive than the college classroom permits. However, teachers have to remain open to the possibility that some nontraditional students, particularly those who are business and professional persons, may have certain techniques or procedures that may contradict some of the traditional premises of speech textbooks. For example, many business people feel as Mr. Smith did about the value of sales kits or presentational charts--that visual materials are an end in themselves rather than an aid. While

a speech communication teacher may not like this approach that seems more a demonstration than an oral presentation, s/he may have to accept it and merely try to train students to be more effective in the use of the materials.

For The University

1. The first advantage of offering nontraditional instruction is that some additional income can be generated at a time when enrollments are down in many colleges and universities. Workshop fees are usually proportionately higher than standard tuition. For example, we have no problem charging $150 for a two-day session, while tuition for full time students amounts to less that $3 a day. Also, for public institutions, in some cases even non-credit seminar registration figures can be included when student head counts are made, increasing the allocation from the state or county.

Faculty members in many universities are lagging dangerously behind inflation in cost-of-living raises. Occasional extra fees for special workshops can help supplement the inadequate salaries. Granted these will never be large fees, but many more could be generated if more sessions and workshops were designed.

2. The second advantage for the institution lies in the potential to expand the campus into the community rather than sustained attempts to bring the community to the campus. The university can become a generalized training center, not just

a degree-track, credit earning, semester hour institute serving only the traditional student. Rather than trying to fit the nontraditional student to the mold, a greater value may be found in developing nontraditional instructional methods and procedures that enable us to take what we know out of the formal classroom and into specific settings. Our image that has spawned cliches such as "ivory towered" or "scholastic sanctuary" has in many instances created a polarized campus-versus-community mind set. Perhaps we might find more favorable redefinition if we moved from the "halls of ivy" into the business world more frequently.

A Concluding Question

Many colleges and universities have active off-campus programs through divisions such as special services or continuing education. We wonder, however, if there are those among you who have experienced our frustration in trying to work with these divisions? We did not put the real estate training program through the Office of Continuing Education on our campus because we have tried on several other occasions and have found the policies and procedures so difficult to work with that we've given up.

Our Continuing Education office automatically adds a 35% overhead charge to any program it sponsors, regardless of the level of involvement its office may have. This is passed to the customer and may make a workshop fee unreasonably high. Second, fees for the instructors must be added to the regular

paycheck, with the proportionate percentage withheld for the retirement program. However, the appropriate income tax is not withheld; rather, the computer treats the total as if that were the amount of money made every month and subtracts an abnormally high percentage. All attempts by faculty to renogotiate this process have failed.

Thirdly, Continuing Education has a set of approval forms that would frighten the most experienced grantsman. Approval must be gained from five different major university officials, a process that can take weeks if any are out of town or particularly busy.

Finally, the amount of the stipend that can be paid to any instructor is limited to a set daily amount, or in the summer to one-twelfth of the annual salary, regardless of the length of the workshop. The fee is far lower than could be earned on a consulting basis. No real reason has ever been presented for this limitation. This restriction is not placed on the law school or medical faculty members at Chapel Hill, or they have found a way around it. Our Continuing Education staff shows no interest in helping us achieve a more equitable renumeration.

We could not buck this system, so we went around it and established an outside consulting firm. Many colleagues in other universities have done the same. Yet ideally we would like to have such training workshops be an official program of the university, for we believe in the mutual advantageousness.

REFERENCES

[1]Haim G. Ginott. Between Parent and Child (New York: McMillan and Co.), 1965.

[2]George R. Bach and Peter Wyden. The Intimate Enemy (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.), 1969.

[3]Paul P. Timm. Managerial Communication: A Finger on the Pulse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 1980.

[4]Those reasons included saving time, free from constant interruption by phone and doorbell, safety and security, screening out of curiosity seekers, objectivity about the condition of the house, knowledge of forms and sources of mortgage money, knowledge of all technical steps such as title searches, absorption of all selling expenses, professional copywriting for ads, contact with out-of-towners who may be moving to the area, and it all costs the seller nothing unless the house is sold.

[5]Full-time equivalents. All state institutions have some formula for allocating monies on a head-count basis. Ours is in FTEs.